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RICHARD ROEPER

Getting the real dirt on problem parking lot

The caller was so excited he was having trouble gulping breaths. "Rich there's something weird going on in this parking lot over by North Pier!" he exclaimed.

"The whole lot has been shut down, and they've got all these machines there, and they're digging up the place. Big sheets of plastic are draped over mountains of dirt. And there's a sign up saying the place is undergoing 'environmental remediation,' whatever that means. It's like a scene from 'Outbreak' or something."

I told him to stop hyperventilating, then I promised I'd check it out and let him know what was what.

The parking lot in question is at 316 E. Illinois, and sure enough it has been closed and surrounded by a temporary cyclone fence and wooden boards. Signs posted on the fence said, "This Parking Lot Is Undergoing Environmental Remediation. We Sincerely Apologize to Our Loyal Customers for This Inconvenience."

Then I remembered: When entering that lot in the past, I'd often noted a strange little sign on the machine that spits out your parking validation.

I walked over to one of the dormant machines and jotted down the message on that little sign: "NOTICE AND WARNING TO PARKING LOT PATRONS AND EMPLOYEES: This lot is undergoing environmental tests in cooperation with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Preceding tests have revealed elevated gamma readings. However, the U.S. EPA has advised us that the lot can stay open."

Obviously something had changed, for the lot is now anything but open. About 10 huge red trailers were lined up at one end of the parking lot, and several bulldozers were scattered about. Portions of the blacktop were ripped up. Guys in hard hats were operating jackhammers and other pieces of heavy equipment.

I was allowed inside the temporary compound, but when I was directed to the man in charge, he said, "You're going to have to talk to the EPA. That's what I'm supposed to say to anyone who comes here asking questions."

Ominous! Maybe there really was some sort of "Outbreak" deal going on right under our noses.

Not really.

The Sun-Times has reported in the past about the radioactivity lurking under the parking lot. Now, the invisible problem is under attack by bulldozers and jackhammers. They're literally moving the earth to erase the problem.

Here's what I learned after talking to the Chicago office of the Environmental Protection Agency and a source at one of the two companies paying for the project in question.

In the 1930s, the space in question was occupied by the Lindsay Light Co., which manufactured mantles for gas lanterns. The mantles contained thorium, a radioactive metal.

In the mid-1930s, Lindsay Light moved to suburban West Chicago, and decades later it was swallowed up by Kerr-McGee.

When the EPA began a major cleanup of radioactive dirt on the West Chicago site, they learned about the original location of Lindsay Light. After conducting tests, the EPA ordered an environmental cleanup of the parking lot, to be paid for by Kerr-McGee and the Chicago Dock & Canal Trust Co., which owns the land.

The bill? At least \$1 million. Probably closer to \$2 million.

The soil beneath the blacktop is being removed and transported to rail cars. From there it goes to a landfill in Utah. Then everything will be repaved and repainted, and the parking lot will be back in business by the end of this year or very early in 1997.

But not to worry if you left the family minivan at that lot when visiting Navy Pier this summer, or even if you regularly parked in the lot so you could go grocery shopping at the market across the street. You're not going to be able to use your own body as a night light or anything like that.

"The risk is less than minimal," a spokesman for the EPA told me. "You could park there every day for years and the cumulative effect wouldn't be as much as a single chest X-ray."

"The cleanup is being done as a precaution. If, some day, they were to build a high-rise on that site, they'd be digging up this dirt and it would be getting on pieces of machinery and maybe it would be dumped in another Chicago location... this way it's being disposed of properly."

OK, caller? Now take 10 deep breaths...

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